

National Association of State Boards of Education

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State Advances in Early Childhood Education Seed Plans for 2024

By Winona Hao

Many states made significant strides in 2023 toward universal pre-K, increased funding and support for early childhood educators, and improved early literacy and math instruction. State boards of education can draw from a rich playbook of state policy actions in 2023 to inform their 2024 plans.

These leading states have recognized the impact of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) on a child's later college and career readiness and success in life. Yet disparities in program access, quality, and resource allocation continue to deprive many young children and their families of adequate support. By investigating and applying state boards' authority and their impact in collaborating with legislatures and governors, more states can develop effective policies to strengthen the ECE system and ensure equitable access to high-quality learning for young children.

This update reflects information gathered from news reports and state board meeting agendas and minutes that chronicle state policy activity in 2023 affecting children's access to education from birth to third grade. While not a comprehensive review of state actions last year, this report does provide a snapshot of trending issues and approaches.

UNIVERSAL PRE-K

More states and policymakers committed to significant investments in high-quality state-funded pre-K last year. In addition, at least 12 state boards had included early learning or expanded/universal preschool as a goal or priority in their strategic plans by the end of 2023.

Maryland's Strategic Plan to Transform Education, approved by the state board in June

2023, elevates ECE as the first of five pillars for the state education system. The 10-year plan commits to expanding pre-K access, making full-day pre-K freely available to all low-income children and with sliding-scale fees for others.

California has been expanding access to its transitional kindergarten (TK) program, with the aim of making it available to four-year-olds in all its districts by the start of the 2025–26 school year. The \$2.7 billion program requires new teachers to gain credentials comparable to their elementary school peers, although the rules include provisions that grandfather in TK educators who began teaching before 2015 and with options for those who began after 2015 to meet TK credential requirements. In addition, while districts have the final say on compensation, TK teachers can typically expect the same pay as kindergarten teachers.

The requirements may make it harder to fill the new teaching positions, as many districts were already grappling with teacher shortages. An analysis last fall found that 80 percent of California districts did not have enough qualified TK teachers.¹ Meanwhile, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing approved a new credential for preK–grade 3, with a focus on literacy.²

A new legislative commission in **Maine** is studying what would be needed to expand public prekindergarten to all eligible Maine children over the next four years. While about 85 percent of Maine districts offer some kind of pre-K, not all their programs can serve all eligible children. The commission is expected to offer recommendations to the legislature in early 2024.³

FUNDING AND WORKFORCE

As federal COVID relief funding is exhausted, many states' ECE systems face a poten-

tial financial cliff. State policymakers are grappling with how to ensure that existing support for ECE continues without disrupting services to children and families.

Vermont legislators passed a bill to expand access to pre-K, with \$76 million in new funding in fiscal year 2024 and nearly \$125 million in fiscal year 2025. The law aims to boost the number of hours per week and weeks per year that three- to five-year-olds can receive free pre-K. Previously, these children were entitled to 10 hours of free public pre-K a week for 35 weeks a year. By increasing the subsidy reimbursement rate by 35 percent to match the true cost of running quality child care programs, the new law aims to help child care providers improve program quality and access.⁴ In addition, the legislation sought to increase compensation for early childhood educators and strengthen governance of the ECE system as a whole.

Virginia's governor proposed \$448 million for child care and early education. Part of the administration's plan would let eligible parents choose among child care options such as home-care providers or community co-ops.⁵

After **Illinois** increased funding for the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity program, it reported an 18 percent increase in the number of early educator applicants enrolled in higher ed programs who were able to get their credentials with full scholarships. The consortium is a central mechanism by which state leaders hope to achieve their strategic goal of increasing early educator access to higher education, aligning the system, and meeting ECE workforce needs. It includes 61 public and private higher education institutions, six state agencies, and community partners.⁶ The legislature also approved spending \$250 million more for ECE and over \$100 million to support current ECE teachers heading to college to gain credentials and other prospective teacher candidates. The state board called for new providers in pre-school deserts to apply for the grants.⁷

Child care providers that serve low-income **Missouri** families will soon receive new state subsidies totaling \$78 million.⁸ A state Chamber of Commerce survey identified employee access to child care as a top priority of Missouri employers. In a follow-on to 2023 legislation and in response to the call from business leaders, the state board approved an emergency rule to expand the pool of childcare providers eligible to receive grant funding.

EARLY LITERACY

Early literacy has been a major focus for state leaders. In collaboration with NASBE, state board members in select states considered how to best align state policies with the science of reading during several study sessions in 2023. By the end of 2023, 32 states had adopted comprehensive early literacy policies focused on teacher preparation and professional development, high-quality instruction and curriculum, early literacy screening for students beginning in kindergarten, and reading disability interventions and supports.

Oregon provided almost \$150 million to overhaul how children are taught to read. Districts can use the money for training and coaching teachers, new curriculum materials, summer school reading programs, or small-group tutoring.⁹ A follow-up bill requires local school boards to post a link to the state education agency's website, on which parents can see which textbooks and materials the state board adopted.

A third evaluation of **Colorado's** 2013 READ Act focused on students identified with significant reading deficiencies and the percentage of students reading at grade level by third grade. The results showed improvement on these measures, positive feedback from teachers and administrators, popular and impactful in-service trainings, and alignment of the state-approved list of reading curricula with requirements of the act.¹⁰

Kansas used COVID relief funding to train classroom teachers in implementation of the science of reading. In an August 2023 meeting, the state commissioner, Randy Watson, reported to the state board that half of Kansas preK-3 teachers had received LETRS training,

and he urged the board to support embedding the training in licensure going forward.

EARLY MATH

Early literacy and math go hand in hand in determining a student's learning trajectory. While many states have been focusing on early literacy, some are setting policies to advance early math.

In its Third Grade Success Act, the **West Virginia** legislature in 2023 addressed both early literacy and math. The law covered teacher training, support personnel, dyslexia and dyscalculia screenings, intervention strategies, and parent engagement, among other things. It also required the state board to develop benchmark assessments and screeners for language arts and math.¹¹ All K-3 students must be screened within the first 30 days of the school year, with repeated mid-year and end-of-year screenings.

The **California** state board updated math instructional guidance aligned with the California Common Core State Standards for Mathematics. The Mathematics Framework for California Public Schools was approved on its third iteration and reflects revisions responsive to thousands of public comments fielded over two 60-day public comment periods and two public hearings.

The **Delaware** state education agency released the Delaware K-12 Mathematics Framework in 2023. It provides education leaders with the direction, resources, and support needed to provide all students with quality math instruction.

Colorado invested \$6 million in pandemic relief money to make the Zearn Math digital learning program available statewide as part of a broader effort to close the math achievement gap.

Having made major strides in early literacy, the **Mississippi** state board approved \$11 million over four years for math coaching for teachers in select schools.

CONCLUSION

State boards play a sizable role in building early education systems. They also oversee policy implementation. Through NASBE's

ECE State Network and ECE workgroups, participating state boards have demonstrated commitment and collective impact as they sought to provide high-quality early learning experiences for young children. There is much to celebrate in state-level successes in 2023. Yet there are still gaps to be closed and issues to be addressed.

In 2024, leading states will likely need to pursue rule making related to 2023 legislative initiatives and to evaluate the impact of their previous efforts. Other states can learn from the actions described in this update and initiate actions to extend ECE access, improve equity and program quality, and identify sustainable funding. The particular needs of young multilingual learners may also merit added attention.

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NOTES

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2 California Commission on Teaching Credentialing, "Introduction to the PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential," [web page](#); Carolyn Jones, "Beyond Crayons and Circle Time: What California Transitional Kindergarten Needs to Succeed," *Cal Matters*, October 2, 2023.

3 Nicole Ogrysko, "Legislative Panel Considering How to Expand Public Pre-K in Maine," *Maine Public*, November 2, 2023.

4 Alliance for Early Success, "Vermont Passes Historic Child Care Legislation That Includes New, Long-Term Funding," June 30, 2023.

5 Nathaniel Cline, "Youngkin Announces Plan for Millions in Early Childhood and Child Care Spending," *Virginia Mercury*, December 7, 2023.

6 Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity: *First Annual Report*, August 2023.

7 Peter Hancock, "Illinois Board of Education Looking for New Providers in Preschool 'Deserts,'" *Capitol News Illinois*, June 1, 2023.

8 Clara Bates, "\$78M Boost to Missouri's Child Care Subsidy Slated to Reach Providers Next Month," *the 74*, July 25, 2023.

9 Julia Silverman, "Oregon's Big Reading Investment Could Take Years to Pay Off," *Governing*, June 28, 2023.

10 Jenny Brundin, "Six Takeaways from the Latest Evaluation of Colorado's Literacy Law," *Colorado Public Radio*, September 14, 2023.

11 West Virginia Department of Education, "Third Grade Success Act," [web page](#).